

A K-TOWN DIVIDED

HYONGSOON KIM



Photo by Kevin Scanlon

Hyongsoon Kim: The Koreatown Advocate

By Patrick Range McDonald

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On the 24th floor of Century Plaza Towers, in his office at Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld, attorney Hyongsoon Kim enjoys expansive views of West L.A. and the Pacific Ocean but revels in what's closer to hand: a mess of legal briefs, boxes and court documents strewn about the room. "This chaos to me invites creativity," says Kim, 34. "You're not going to find a lot of attorneys who will agree with me. ... But litigation is chaos. You can't control every piece of it. It's good for a litigator to thrive in chaos. Because that's what you're in the middle of."

Kim studied to be a classical musician as a teen, attended Cal State L.A. at age 15 and earned his law degree from Columbia at 22. Today he's lead attorney in a federal lawsuit that's shining a light on Los Angeles City Hall chicanery by challenging a controversial 2012 gerrymander that handed City Council president Herb Wesson more power. The lawsuit alleges that Wesson, the L.A. City Council and the redistricting commission illegally used race as the main factor to redraw voting-district boundaries for Wesson's City Council District 10. The contorted land-grab consolidated Wesson's black voter bloc — and diluted the power of rising Koreatown.

"Certain City Council members had a vision of what they wanted Council District 10 to be," Kim says, "and they got it. They weren't particularly concerned about what the residents wanted."

Kim and a team of Akin Gump lawyers are working pro bono on a suit brought by several K-Town residents. "I hadn't really paid attention to issues affecting the Korean-American community," says Kim, born in Minnesota to South Korean immigrants and raised mostly in Los Angeles. "Joining the Korean American Bar Association opened my eyes."

Now president of the association, Kim regularly visits Koreatown and provides free help to low-income residents facing immigration problems and landlord-tenant disputes. He was disturbed to find bustling K-Town, a rich mix of Latinos, Asians, blacks and whites, in a "state of disrepair," struggling to be heard by three different elected City Council members. Koreatown activists wanted to correct that by using the city's "redistricting" process to undo an old gerrymander that carved up Koreatown, badly fragmenting one of the densest neighborhoods in the United States.

Their dream was shattered when Wesson, behind closed doors, engineered a new gerrymander that again chopped up K-Town — then implausibly denied that he was involved. (Wesson recently admitted he played a secret, central role.)

During packed public hearings in 2012, Latino and Korean-American leaders such as Helen Kim spoke vociferously for Koreatown. Hyongsoon Kim says he was a "bystander" then, but "when all those efforts failed, I was ready to represent." His senior partners at Akin Gump didn't hesitate to join him.

Wesson may regret his maneuvering. Kim says the redistricting fight created an "awakening" of Koreatown. Remembering the devastation when the area was burned by arsonists during the 1992 Los Angeles riots, Kim says, "Not since then I have seen with my own eyes Koreatown come together. It has made me very proud to see that."

The city "could have substantial resources to go against us," he says, "but I couldn't care less. We're doing this pro bono. We're not getting paid. We believe in this case."